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FAST SERMONS



TWO
DISCOURSES
DELIVERED
AT NEEDHAM,
FIRST PARISH:
ON OCCASION OF
THE PUBLIC FAST,
April 7 1785.

By SAMUEL WEST, A. M.


Pastor of a Church in NEEDHAM

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DISCOURSES

DELIVERED

AT THE DORM

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ON OCCASION

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BY JOHN A. M.

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First Discourse.

Religion is a spiritual service, the outward and positive duties of which, can be acceptable to our Maker, no farther than as they flow from the heart, and tend to the improvement of our practical piety and goodness. This reflection is peculiarly proper to the present occasion ; and it is the general design of the following discourses, to illustrate and apply it, agreeable to the obvious meaning of those words,

ISAIAH 58th Chap. first Part of the 6th Verse.

Is not this the Fast that I have chosen ? to loose the bands of wickedness.

IT is too much the general disposition of mankind, to substitute the positive duties, or empty forms of religion, instead of its real spirit and essential virtues ; and we shall not injure the character of the Jews, if we affirm, that this was, in a high degree, their national fault. The dispensation which they were under, was loaded with ceremony ; so, as justly to be termed, a yoke of bondage ;

bondage : to which in the excess of their zeal, they added many of their own invention ; and by a fond attachment to, and observance of those trifling ceremonies, they, in effect, made void the moral law, and smothered in their breasts the most essential branches of piety and social affection. As the body is injured by too much dress, so is religion by too much ceremony ; which will unfailingly weaken the principles of piety, and real goodness of heart. The Jews were far from neglecting the duty of fasting ; on the contrary, it appears that in the days of our Prophet, as well as in those of our Saviour, they fasted oft, though for the base purposes of strife and debate, or to cloak under that specious disguise, the wickedness of their hearts and lives : nor is it ordinarily found, that mankind submit to numerous and burdensome forms and ceremonies in religion, unless with the foolish opinion of attoning thereby for the want of real practical holiness. God, by his prophets, frequently expostulates with the Jews upon this head ; and in the words of our text, with what follows, plainly informs both them and us, what kind of fasting he will approve ; and in effect, what must be the aim of every religious observance in order to his acceptance. Is not this the Fast that I have chosen ? or, this is, and this only is the Fast that I have chosen, to loose the bands of wickedness. It appears, from what follows, that, loosing the bands of wickedness, refers to the oppression of the rich and powerful over the poor and helpless people : the greatness of such oppression, in the decline of the Jewish state

state, may be learned from many parts of scripture history ; and it was the more criminal, as God, their great legislator, had with exquisite wisdom, provided against it, by establishing an happy equality among them. Or, the words may be designed particularly against the oppression of civil rulers, who, according to the general spirit of power, had perverted the divine institution of government, adapted to the general good, to their own private advantage, whilst they exercised the most cruel tyranny over the people at large. But the phrase may be understood with greater extent, as referring to sin in general, whose hold on the hearts of men is often such, as may justly be compared to strong bands, which bind the limbs, whilst it subjects them to the severest bondage, and leads them in chains of voluntary captivity to accomplish their own destruction. Taking the words in this extensive sense, they will afford us the following plain remark, viz. That the only Fast acceptable to God, is that which is attended with breaking off from sin, or is sincerely aimed at the improvement of our hearts and lives, in piety and goodness. Whilst we pursue the illustration of this practical truth, may the humility of our hearts dispose us to seek, and the goodness of our God bestow upon us, such supplies of the spirit of Jesus, as may confirm our religious affections, and animate us to the practice of all the amiable duties of christianity.—It will be proper to consider, more particularly, the nature of a religious Fast, agreeable to the text ; and as a duty of christianity.—Why only such a Fast as described, can be accepted

ed with our Maker.—Practically, to point out how the design of this duty may be answered.—And conclude with some address, as the time will admit.

FIRST, then, we shall consider more particularly the nature of a religious Fast, agreeable to the text, and as a duty of christianity. And in general, a religious Fast, considered as a part of that reasonable service which the christian pays to the Father of Spirits, may be defined, a moderate denial of our bodily appetites, from motives of religion; and views to its advancement. A moderate denial of our appetites is here represented as making one part of this duty; it is indeed the most obvious part, and the only direct meaning of the term Fasting; which when applied to any thing beside, as to forsaking sin, restraint of our passions, or government of our desires, is used only as a metaphor. It may, indeed, be objected, that, to make bodily abstinence any part of a religious Fast, is falling into the very mistake with which the Jews were charged, and against which our text was designed to guard them—that it favours much of superstition, and seems to countenance that enthusiasm which, in all ages, has attempted, by voluntary sufferings, to soften the Divine resentment, and render the great God propitious to his creatures—it is representing the God of love directly contrary to his nature, as pleased with the sufferings of mankind—The blessings of the present life, are the provision which our kind Father in Heaven has made for his offspring here on earth; to enjoy them with temperance and moderation,

expresses

expresses our gratitude and obedience to him ;— the contrary is a kind of fullness, which may sadden the countenance, like that of the Pharisees in the time of our Saviour, but can not better the heart.—Above all, whatever might be proper for the Jews, whose Religion was a material image of the spiritual dispensation of the gospel ; the christian can be under no obligations to such observance. The religion of Jesus is spirit and life, not form and ceremony ; it consists in pure and holy affections of the heart, disposing its happy subjects to seek the glory of the great Father of the universe, by endeavouring to promote the happiness of his creatures. Love fulfills his law ; and to do good is the only sacrifice with which he is pleased.—However plausible this reasoning may appear, I will venture to say, it does by no means set aside the propriety of bodily abstinence, as making a part of the duty before us, even under the christian dispensation. Our text assures us, indeed, that this is not the principal, or most essential part of a religious Fast ; but does by no means imply that it is no part at all, or that it may be wholly neglected. The expression taken in this sense, is perfectly agreeable to the language of scripture, in many other instances : Thus, ‘ I will have mercy and not sacrifice,’ only implies, that the exercise of mercy is, in the sight of God, infinitely more acceptable than the most costly victims offered in sacrifice on his altar.—And our Lord speaks, in the same comparative language, in that remarkable declaration, which should deeply impress the heart of every christian ; ‘ If any man come to me, and

hate not his father and mother, wife and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple' ; which can only intend, that those dear names, naturally objects of the most tender affection, should be cast from us, with a resolute indignation, when interposing between Christ and our hearts, or endangering our fidelity to him, and interest in his favour.—Accordingly the Fast which God hath chosen consists not principally in that bodily abstinence which is only expressive of the soul's real intention, but points to something infinitely more important, its pious resolution of forsaking sin, and cultivating purity, and holiness of heart and life. Abstinence is the form, as the pious intention is the life and spirit of the duty ; and both unite in rendering it compleat. Superstition is thus sufficiently guarded against, by keeping the design in view—and considering the denial of appetite, as no further good, than as it tends to the improvement of our spiritual desires, to raise us above material joys, and animate our hearts with the love of God.

OUR Maker indeed, is full of compassion ; he has made us for happiness : but how often is a present denial of our inclinations necessary, to the accomplishment of that great and gracious purpose ? Christianity is a religion, in its essential nature, altogether spiritual ; nor can any outward ceremony, or positive observance, be considered as necessary to it, or as strictly making any part of that divine system. But, as health consists in the happy disposition of the animal frame, without respect to outward actions ; and yet where it is enjoyed, those
outward

outward expressions of it will follow : so religion is a kind of spiritual health, which, whenever it takes place in the heart, will express itself in outward actions ; and that, not in social and personal virtues only, but in the practice of piety and devotion to God. The latter, as it is the first obligation on human nature, so will it be the first attended to, as the source of the former. Vain are all other principles for supporting a virtuous life ; piety alone can effect the purpose ; and, as streams from a living fountain, so will every other branch of real goodness flow from a devotedness of the heart to our Father in heaven.

WE cannot conceive that christianity, which is a law of liberty, and has erected no visible tribunal with authority to decree modes, or decide respecting forms of worship, can consider any particular modes as binding on its subjects—Positive institutions, like positive laws, must imply a visible authority somewhere, which shall be decisive in explaining them ; otherwise, so vague and uncertain is the meaning of words when applied to any thing except primary truths, they must prove a perpetual bone of contention : this has been remarkably the case, and will be so, whilst the institutions of christianity are considered as positive commands of its author, and not as rational expressions of piety, recommended indeed by scripture example, but adopted and practised by the disciples of Christ, in the genuine spirit of christian liberty.

THUS understood, the consistent christian may comply with the positive duties of religion, and

find, from his own happy experience, as thousands have before, that animated by faith, they are well-adapted means of invigorating our religious affections, and furthering the life of God in the souls of men. Together with several other plain and easy, though significant observances, Fasting comes recommended to us, at least implicitly, by Christ himself, in what is called his Sermon on the Mount ; a discourse which discovers its divine original, by its infinite superiority to every human production : he particularly represents the manner in which his disciples were to observe a religious Fast. ‘ Thou, when thou fastest, anoint thy head and wash thy face, that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father who is in secret.’ How greatly is devotion perverted, when made to serve the purposes of pride, by a fair appearance in the sight of men, instead of being considered as a means of recommending us to our Maker, by abasement of heart and poverty of spirit exercised towards him, but modestly concealed from the world around us?—Again, when the question was put to our Saviour by John’s disciples, “ Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but thy disciples fast not ?” His answer is a plain recommendation of the duty referred to, ‘ Can the children of the bride-chamber mourn, as long as the bride-groom is with them ? The days will come, when the bride-groom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast,’ intimating, that though his presence rendered the time of his abode with them a kind of continual festival, yet they would find abundant reason for practising that

that duty afterwards, when engaged in the trials and surrounded with the temptations which would attend them, in approving their zeal for and fidelity to him.—We accordingly find the Apostles and primitive Christians frequently practising this duty, which, though it has indeed frequently been adopted by superstition, and ministered to the extravagance of enthusiasm, has, under proper restraints, subserved the purposes of real piety and true christian devotion in every age of the christian church. Next to scripture example, it may serve to justify and recommend any positive observance, when we find it naturally expressive of the end which it is designed to promote. Bodily abstinence, or fasting, is thus recommended to us, as will clearly appear by attending to the several religious views which ought to fill our minds and engage our hearts on such occasions. Fasting very happily expresses a sense of our dependence on the providence of God, for the blessings of the present life ; which at once gives an higher relish to our temporal enjoyments, and fits us for those of a more spiritual and sublime nature. However obvious, we are very liable to forget to whose kind hand we are indebted for the blessings of life. Governed chiefly by our senses, we limit our views to material causes, and ascribe that to an unmeaning order of nature, which is the effect of the unremitted agency of Nature's God. When for successive years, we observe the earth renewed with the opening spring, producing, ripening, and finally yielding her fruits with a liberal hand, for the support of her numerous inhabitants, like
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the idolatrous heathen, we are ready to worship the visible source of our blessings, forgetful of that invisible Parent whose care for his family here below, is expressed in the rich abundance of the earth's productions. But our dependence on providence includes our civil and social enjoyments; the whole inventory of human joys, from the moment he called us into being, is furnished from the boundless goodness of our Father in Heaven. No pleasing sensation, no refined social joy, no cheerful hope can reach this heart of mine, but all is thy gift, Parent of good. May my gratitude be in some proportion to the greatness of my obligations, and my devotedness to and fidelity in thy service, express the sense I entertain of dependence on thy bounty.

FASTING expresses a conscious unworthiness of the blessings we enjoy; and what more proper to affect our minds at such seasons? Whilst we deny ourselves some part of our usual and innocent gratifications, we implicitly acknowledge that we have forfeited the whole.—Our first parents in Paradise had a right, by the gift of their Maker, to that garden of blessedness; but alas! they forfeited that title, and therefore could not transmit it to us their posterity, who inherit nothing from them, but their depravity, and its painful effects. The preservation of the fallen human race, from the ruin incurred by sin, was the consequence of divine love, which in the mediation of the Son of God, once more embraced mankind, whom no finite power could rescue from wretchedness, implanted the seed of life in the human heart,

heart, and said, Live, for I have found a ransom—
 Whatever good is since indulged to the children
 of men, is the effect of unmerited goodness in the
 Father of mercies, bestowed on those who deserve
 his displeasure, for the sake of that Son of his love,
 who dwells in human nature, unites us with Hea-
 ven, and is the medium of all the numerous blef-
 sings which Heaven bestows.—This has been the
 language of piety in every age, I am not worthy,
 says the good patriarch Jacob, of the least of all
 the mercies which thou hast shewed unto thy ser-
 vant. The devout Psalmist often expresses him-
 self in the same humble strain; nor is it possible for
 the pious heart to reflect on its own numerous
 failings, without a deep impression of the same
 truth, and a ready acknowledgment that, as all
 good wrought within, so every blessing bestowed
 upon him, flows from the fountain of love through
 that divine Redeemer, in whom all fulness dwells.
 It is only from this view of ourselves, and the
 mercies we enjoy, that the goodness of God lead-
 eth to repentance; whilst every act of kindness
 from the hand of Providence, like that of an in-
 dulent father to an ungrateful child, serves to
 mind us of the baseness of such ingratitude, and
 to produce an ingenuous contrition of heart.
 Happy temper! which disposes us to embrace the
 hand of redeeming love, and to rest our all on him
 who is mighty to save.

FASTING expresses the necessity of governing
 our animal appetites, passions and desires; and is
 a tacit resolution of endeavouring to do so. As,
to know ourselves, is the summit of human know-
ledge;

ledge ; so self-government is the highest attainment in virtue : an attainment difficult indeed, but not beyond the reach of him, who, being a disciple, is taught in the school of Christ. Helpless in ourselves, we are all-powerful in him, whose fulness filleth all in all ; who is not therefore distant from us. He is that divine word which is nigh in our hearts, and which is infinitely able to subdue all things to himself.—He is that law of the spirit which would expel every degree of impurity from our breasts, and bring every thought into captivity to Christ.—Let us only attend to his powerful dictates,—yield ourselves to his influence, and he will diffuse that spirituality through all the faculties of the soul, which will restore the lost image of our Maker in holiness and true goodness, as the seal of our divine Master, distinguishing our relation to him, and title to all the glorious and happy consequences of his mediation. The plea of inability has no place here ; it is equally absurd as for one who is surrounded with the light of the sun, to plead his incapacity of seeing without it, to excuse his neglect of using his eyes : for the light of the natural sun is not more widely and indulgently diffused, than is the light and energy of the Sun of righteousness.

TURBULENCE of appetite, strength of passion, are by no means to be admitted as any excuse for the neglect of conformity to God ; since they vanish before his spirit, who has all power in his hand, and who can, with infinite ease, subdue the most obstinate heart, and form it to his will.—It is therefore with the utmost reason required of the

disciples

disciples of Christ, that they crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts. That as Christ lives and rules within them, so they in him should possess the government of their hearts, and regulate every principle of nature so as shall not only be consistent with, but tend to adorn the christian name, and further the cause and the glory of Christ.—Happy is the bosom where the Prince of peace thus rules! The peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall keep his heart and mind through Christ Jesus.

AGAIN, Abstinence expresses a conscious superiority to sense and its joys—an attention to nobler prospects and higher enjoyments than those which respect the animal appetites, or are confined within the limits of the present life; a proper sense of our relation to another world, infinitely more important to us than this, for inhabiting which, it is necessary for us to rise gradually above a fond attachment to animal pleasures, to cultivate a relish for delights of a more refined nature,—such as filial love and gratitude to, and holy confidence in, our heavenly Father, as the centre of our affections and the source of our happiness,—the endearing charities of social life, which, by mingling our joys and sorrows, lessen the latter, and greatly strengthen and improve the former, together with that pleasing approbation of our own minds which St. Paul tells us was a source of rejoicing to himself and his brethren, and above all the prospect of heaven and the compleat and endless enjoyment of our God, or that spiritual mindedness which is life and peace.

THE time will soon arrive when the senses will be sealed forever by the hand of death ; but the immortal spirit will then enjoy its native freedom; and according as it is formed by the hand of divine grace here, to the love and relish of truth and goodness, will then join with kindred spirits, in the praise, service and enjoyment of the great source of being and blessedness. Frequently should we mind ourselves of this great unknown, but certain period ; nor can we practice a more significant emblem of it, than a temporary denial of those animal appetites which must then fall victims to the hand of death, as obstructing the joys of eternal life.—Gradual indeed is the progress of christian virtue : it is a progress which we hold against the current of depraved nature, against the powerful influence of worldly example ; and scripture assures us, that a subtle, though unseen enemy, watches our steps, to decoy us from the path of virtue. We need then summon to our aid every help with which religion has furnished us, and take advantage of every favourable expedient to fortify our minds against the assault of temptation, and to animate our resolution in the arduous and all-important enterprize. But, after all our circumspection, we are never to lose sight of our divine leader in the sacred conflict ; in his armour must we be clad, in his name pursue the contest ; and it is only in him we can reasonably hope to overcome. Let us therefore wait on him in the retirement of our own hearts, listen to the suggestions of his spirit as intimations from above, follow his dictates, and yield ourselves to his forming

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ing hand. Our progress will be sure, though it may appear slow ; every step we take will reward our pains ; it will place us on higher ground ; give us more extensive prospects of the heavenly world ; and raise us above the fears, dangers and anxieties of the present state.

Thus they who travel the ways of Zion, go from strength to strength.—The attraction becomes stronger as the object is nearer ; it is strongest in death ; sustains the soul in that awful moment ; and as it affords the present earnest, so it ensures to us the joys of heaven when life is over.

SUCH are the views, my dear people, with which we would wish to fill your minds on the present occasion. This will be sanctifying a Fast to some reasonable and valuable purpose ; and in the advantage which you will derive from it to your own souls, you will have sufficient evidence of its being such a Fast as the Lord hath chosen.

THE END OF THE FIRST DISCOURSE.



Second Discourse.

AS health gives vigor and sprightliness to our actions, which in their turn are necessary to preserve and confirm that health ; so does the spirit of religion animate its outward duties, whilst the practice of those duties serves to invigorate the inward principle. These (viz. the spirit and the practice) are two essential parts of the same whole which God hath intimately joined together, and which can not be separated, but religion itself will languish and die. Especially, we are never to flatter ourselves that the outward forms of devotion can avail with our Maker, where the heart is not engaged. This is what comes in course to be considered, in the further improvement of those words,

ISAIAH 58th Chapter, 6th Verse.

Is not this the Fast that I have chosen ? to loose the bands of wickedness—

AFTER explaining the nature of such a Fast, and the views which ought to fill the mind and engage the heart in the performance of that duty, agreeably to the requirements of christianity; we are next briefly to represent the reasons why only such a Fast is acceptable in the sight of God : this we do principally for the purpose of effecting our hearts more deeply with a sense of the spirituality

quality of the divine nature, and the necessity of attending to our inward tempers and affections in all our devotional exercises.

THE Lord looketh on the heart, is a sufficient reason why he cannot accept of any service which does not originate there. Were mankind capable of discerning what passes in the breasts of each other, how different would be their judgment of human actions; plausible appearances would then deceive no one; nor fair words cover a malignant heart. The inward principle from which they flow, the motives by which they are influenced, would decide our opinion of the actions of men, and in a great measure denominate them either good or evil. The warmest expressions of friendship, for instance, are utterly condemned, when we consider them as the service of the tongue, and not the language of affection. The outward forms of devotion are expressions of love to, and reverence for the great Father of the universe, and must move his indignation if foreign from the heart.—God is a Being of infinite holiness, or rectitude of character; every thing therefore which implies deceit, is opposed to his nature, and must excite his resentment. But how false and deceitful are these forms of religion, which are put on to disguise the want of real piety, and practised without affection to the great object of worship, or any sincere desires for the knowledge and enjoyment of him?

THE Parent of Being is a principle of boundless active love, from whom nothing but love or its effect, Happiness, can be derived. As the system

system of the universe originated in divine love, to the same affection to his numberless family, guides all the measures of its adorable Author. The laws of nature, and the moral obligations which bind his reasonable creatures, all unite in this one great end, the happiness of the whole.— They are the indissoluble bonds by which God has connected creation with himself, and confined every part of the material world, with its rational inhabitants, to conspire for the accomplishment of his own wise and gracious purpose, the glory of his perfections, in the greatest possible happiness of his creatures.

THIS then must be the end of all positive observances, nor can they be accepted in the sight of God any farther than as they are profitable to us ; they are profitable to us, only as they tend to make us wiser and better, to invigorate our piety, to enlarge and strengthen our social affections, or adorn our characters with personal virtues. Devotion is then only conducive to its designed end, when it serves to further our acquaintance with and resemblance to our heavenly Father, raises us above worldly attachments, and improves us in the tempers and manners of heaven.

THE cold formalities of religion debase the human heart, and tend to produce a servile spirit, very opposite to that inspired by christianity rightly understood. And hence originates a character too common among mankind, where a pharisaical exactness in complying with the outward forms of devotion, covers a temper very distant from the
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love of God, the noble feelings of truth and integrity of heart, the meltings of compassion over human distress, or the generous ardor with which the soul, animated with the spirit of Jesus, emulates a conformity to his amiable example, in purity, holiness and universal goodness.

WHERE the forms of devotion rise from the spirit of piety, it enobles humanity, and gives a dignity to our nature.

THERE is no light in which man can be viewed more to his advantage, than as cultivating this intercourse with the parent of good. It gives him a rank with the spirits in glory, and ripens him for their more immediate society above; it is the source of the most solid and lasting joys, has all the pleasures of friendship, without any of its jealousies and inquietudes; and attentively pursued, would go far towards producing a state of comparative happiness amidst all the imperfections of the present life.

BUT it is time to proceed, as proposed, to point out the practical methods, whereby such a Fast may be made subservient to the design mentioned, viz. the furtherance of religion in our hearts and lives. And in order to this, it will be proper for us briefly to examine the present state of religion among the people at large in our own families,—but above all, in our own hearts and lives; that we may discover what vices are most prevailing, and of consequence, what bands of wickedness are to be loosed, what sins are to be repented of, what temptations guarded against, or virtues cultivated
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and improved.—In giving this character of the times, we shall carefully attend to the wise man's caution, against an unreasonable prejudice in favour of the past, in preference to the present day : " Say not what is the cause that the former days were better than these ?" the prejudice is natural, but the preference is often groundless ; it has been the complaint of every age, and it is obvious to remark, that had it been just, virtue must long ere this have forsaken the earth. *

NOTHING

* It is the evident design of Heaven, that mankind, as inhabiting this earth, should gradually grow wiser and better through successive periods, till they ripen finally into the highest conceivable degrees of excellence. The several stages of this advancement, are invariably preceded by a general decline of knowledge and virtue, which serves as a kind of moral darkness, to mark the approaching dawn.—Thus when all flesh had corrupted their way, God sent the flood, which, whilst it swallowed up that abandoned race in general, brightened the sense of religion, in the minds of the surviving few ; from whom it was transmitted for several ages, with some degree of purity, till a prevailing declension, apparent in the daring attempt at Babel, rendered it necessary for the great God, again to interpose. Abraham was accordingly called forth, specially prepared for the purpose, and religion as a sacred deposit, was lodged in the hands of him and his posterity for many succeeding ages. In the latter part of the Jewish state, ignorance and wickedness in a great measure extinguished the light of truth, when the Sun of righteousness arose on the benighted world, with healing in his beams. Christianity has gradually tended to reform mankind, but still by certain remarkable stages, preceded by a general decline : thus gross darkness and superstition ushered in the reformation from popery, and the surprising advancement of learning which followed. And is it not more than probable, that a false kind of philosophy opposite to, but equally destructive, with the superstition and bigotry referred to, will now prevail, till finally it gives place to some future manifestation of truth, flowing from the source of light, but ministered

NOTHING can be more contemptible than a feigned lamentation over the sins of the times, of which some would seem to make a merit, whilst their own hearts and lives largely share in the evil complained of.—The publick have a right to candour, as well as individuals, and with candour therefore we mean to treat them.

THE present is, at best, a state of great imperfection ; and at every period, vice and iniquity so much abound, that the cause of virtue is greatly endangered ; and they who would walk safely, must walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise. Different vices may prevail at different times ; and this evidently forms the principal distinction of character between one age and another. In justice to the present day, we must allow it far excels, in one instance at least, all preceding periods, viz. in a generous liberality of sentiment, particularly in matters of religion. The history of which in former ages contains little else than the history of bigotry and superstition ; which, wherever they have possessed the power, have trampled on the sacred rights of conscience, and produced the deepest scenes of misery among mankind ; and where power has been wanting, they have vented themselves in railing and invective. This evil has gradually abated throughout the christian world, and particularly in this country ; though some re-

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by illustrious persons who may be raised up and qualified like the first Reformers, for that important purpose ? Nor will we suppose the progress of successive improvement will terminate till the tabernacle of God shall be with men, and all shall know him from the least to the greatest,

mains of civil authority exercised in religious matters, and especially the disposition, which some discover, of wrangling in print upon idle speculations, and empty forms of worship, shew that it is not entirely extinguished.

THE primary truths of religion; are like the primary principles of nature, too obvious to be mistaken by the good and honest heart; all beside is mere opinion, with respect to which, as no man can be certain, so all have an equal right to enjoy their private sentiments; and to please themselves with their opinions, as they do with the colour and mode of their dress.—This seems to be the prevailing spirit of the present times; a spirit which we would wish to cultivate and improve.—But is it not too apparent, that in proportion as this liberality of sentiment has prevailed, it has been attended with a decay of piety and increase of profaneness? This is precisely agreeable to the general conduct of the human mind, which naturally flies from one extreme to another. A discovery of the folly of superstition and bigotry ought to produce a rational piety and manly devotion; instead of which, in numberless instances, it has caused an unreasonable disgust to all devotion, and been improved to the disadvantage of piety itself. Hence that neglect of family worship, so common among us, and so much to the discredit of the present times. Even the Heathen world acknowledged the propriety of domestic religion:—they had their household gods, whose rights were sacredly regarded.—The propriety of it is taught us by the voice of nature itself. How often do we find heads

of families, who habitually neglect this duty, recurring to it in seasons of calamity, inviting the prayers of their pious friends or themselves, by a kind of instinct in nature, looking up to the compassionate Disposer of events, to avert an evil threatened, or relieve an anguish felt? What is this but the voice of reason awakened by danger or distress? Let it be attended to, and it will teach you that not in seasons of affliction only, but at all times, you and yours depend on the kind care and providence of God, for life and all its enjoyments; and that to acknowledge this in the daily sacrifice of family worship, is a reasonable service; which is grateful to our heavenly Father, as it is well adapted to improve the hearts of those who practice it in piety and virtue. Affection to you and your posterity, my dear people, dispose me sincerely to lament that a duty, so suited to the present comfort and future happiness of both, should be neglected by any; and to urge you to the practice of it with all the ardour of friendship and love.—From a neglect of private, follows a too general neglect of publick worship. I shall not say any thing as to the authority of christian institutions. Publick worship is, at least, acknowledged by all serious people to be a means well adapted to promote the interests of religion; and this single consideration is sufficient to make it obligatory on all, who, as parts of human nature, are bound to comply with what tends to the furtherance of human happiness. None will surely pretend that their virtue has attained its greatest advance, and is incapable of improvement. Alas,

how defective are the graces even in the hearts of the best ! how small our progress in the tempers of christianity ! publick worship is an expedient recommended to us by scripture example, and the experience of all ages, for correcting the disorders of the soul, by the secret agency of that blessed spirit, which always accompanies those who worship in spirit and in truth ; strengthening our religious affections, and improving the heart, in that spiritual health which fits it for the service and enjoyment of God. But, unhappy man ! how often art thou opposed to thine own interests ! with what painful exertions dost thou effect an imposition on thy self ! searching after excuses to justify the neglect of what it is thy privilege as well as duty to practise. What trifles will answer the strange purpose of pacifying the deluded mind ?—Happy is that man who candidly listens to the voice of his own conscience, and obeys her dictates. Profaneness is said to be another prevailing evil at the present day.—I am so little conversant in the walks of men, and perhaps guarded in some measure by my sacred office, that I can say nothing from personal knowledge ; but from the word of those whose evidence is not to be disputed, we are assured of the too general spread of this contagious vice, especially among the younger part of the community. This then should be for a lamentation on the present occasion, whilst with a becoming indignation at the enormity of the crime, and affection to those who are chargeable with it, we warn them of their guilt and danger. Let it never be mentioned, as an excuse for such horrid

rid language, that it is used without any evil intention. Can any thing be a more daring insult upon the majesty of heaven, than abuse which is so habitual, as to be offered without reflection?—If there can be a vice without temptation, and therefore without excuse, profaneness is certainly such; it evidently implies an entire want of piety, or that reverence for the Deity which is the only solid ground of practical virtue, and is a kind of earnest, that we may expect every degree of baseness from one who can wantonly abuse the greatest and the best of Beings; ‘let no such man be trusted.’ If you give credit to the sacred scriptures, you must feel the weight of that solemn threat, “The Lord will not hold him guiltless who taketh his name in vain.” When we examine the times with respect to the present state of social virtue, or that affection and duty which mankind owe to each other, it may, we observe with pleasure, be said to the advantage to the age, that there appears a general benevolence in our manners, a sympathy with distress and readiness to acts of kindness; or if it is not general, we have many amiable examples of this kind; unless you will consider it as an external polish, which seldom goes farther than kind words and fair professions, rather than the effect of real principle, and a genuine charity of heart.—A want of integrity is one of the leading characters of the present day. Specious pretences often disguise a treacherous design, and promises made with seeming sincerity serve to betray the simplicity of those who are strangers to the ways of men. Truth is sacred,
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nor can language describe the indignation which is due to the violation of it. Fraud and falshood are as incompatible with honor as with religion; as men we ought to detest them, and much more as christians.—When we consider the character of the times, with respect to personal virtue, the appearances of pride and vanity are obvious, which evidently seduce numbers, both in town and country, to indulge expences equally inconsistent with the interests of their families, their particular engagements, and the good of their country. The man who, without the most pressing necessity, suffers his expences to exceed his income, is guilty of a real fraud with respect to those on whose property he subsists; a fraud greatly aggravated, as it is the effect of an inexcusable vanity and fondness for show.—Happy would it be for mankind, could they be brought to consider things in the just light of reason and religion; the graces of christianity would then form the fairest ornaments in our eyes, and virtue would be viewed as the only title to honor and distinction.—These are the sure source of real joy in this, and will certainly conduct us to the happiness of the coming world.

A FONDNESS for what is called pleasure, that is, for dissipation and sensual indulgence, is also apparent in the manners of the present age.—Many seem resolved to banish from their bosoms all serious reflection, as an enemy to their peace; embracing in its stead the delusive image of happiness in the gaieties, and follies of the present life; but, they will certainly find some time or
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6ther, that life is a serious journey, because it leads to that serious event death; to prepare for which marks the wisdom of man: as it is the great end for which he lives. Not that we would wish to abridge the innocent pleasures, which man may partake in his passage through time. They are few; and transient, at the best; often interrupted with intervals of anxiety and distress; but let them be innocent, and nothing indeed, but what is so deserves the name of pleasure. To enjoy the blessings of Heaven is one mark of gratitude to him who bestows them. Where that enjoyment is regulated by a proper attention to the rational, immortal spirit, and its eternal interest; or is confined to the limits of virtue, and directed by the spirit of religion. This indeed will give the highest relish even to the joys of sense; uniting them with the more refined pleasures arising from inward peace, and the approbation of him whose favor is life.

BUT, of all the vices which disgrace the present day, none perhaps are more apparent than intemperance, and what is nearly connected with it, a shameful incontinence. Man, favoured with the light of truth in his heart, that inward law, which is common to the children of Adam, and which, informed by divine revelation, speaks in a manner easy to be understood, has not far to go in order to learn either his happiness, or the way to secure it.—But alas! yielding himself up to the misrule of animal appetites and turbulent passions, the voice of reason is smothered in his breast, and even the persuasive pleadings of the divine

divine spirit are treated with neglect.—He has, in that case, forsaken the only guide capable of conducting him in the path of safety and peace ; the only friend who can bestow upon him that happiness which is the ardent wish of his soul, and which he vainly pursues in the lawless indulgence of sense. Like one, who, scorched with a fever, mistakes for a remedy, what only tends to inflame his disease, so, the sons of sensuality pursue an imaginary gratification from repeated indulgence, which only serves to increase the disordered state of their hearts, and to set them of course at a greater distance from real peace and joy. It is written in the book of nature, as well as revelation ; and a small share of attention may read it in both—that there is no peace to the wicked !—We do not pretend to determine, whether intemperance is more general now than formerly :—This is obvious, it slays its thousands, and so frequently are we hearing of one and another, who had sustained the fairest characters, falling victims to its baneful influence, that it may well fill us with grief and amazement. In short this is an enemy, which hath cast down so many wounded, so many strong men have been slain by it, that we ought, in reason, to consider ourselves as in danger, and attentively to guard against it ; young persons especially, whose want of experience increases their danger, need often be minded of this snare, from which, those who are once intangled seldom escape ; it being, in this respect, like the shades of death, from which none return, or if they do recover, as it were by miracle, they bear about

about them the plain marks of their enemy, such wounds and bruises as will pain and distress them through the remains of life. I add, for the benefit of those who have been frequently baffled by this vice, that it is in vain to form a truce with an enemy who will keep no measures. Your only security is in renouncing all connection and intercourse with him : or, in plain terms, if you would be safe, it must be by absolutely renouncing an indulgence, which whilst continued, you find yourselves incapable of restraining within the limits of moderation and virtue. Your credit in the world, the welfare, comfort and happiness of your families ; and above all, the favour of your God, and the salvation of your own souls, are surely motives sufficient, if kept in view, to counteract the cravings of a sordid appetite ; or rather the excess of an appetite which grows the more importunate from being indulged. Incontinence is closely connected with intemperance ; as the one confuses the mind and dims the light of reason, so the other takes advantage of that darkness to accomplish its dark and detestable purpose.—What one says of vice in general, may with great propriety be applied in the present case,—

“ Vice is a monster of such hateful mien,

“ As to be hated needs but to be seen.

BUT alas ! incontinence is become so common, and is seen so often, that the monster, grown familiar to us, has lost great part of its deformity ; and there is great danger, lest, in time, it should come to be considered as scarcely criminal. We certainly observe a wide difference between the

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apparent detestation which attended a breach of chastity formerly, and at the present day ; like all common things it has lost its terrors. But does this alter the nature of things ? Is it not the same in the eye of heaven, and ought not its prevalence to be a lamentation to the lovers of virtue, those who wish well to the interests of society or the salvation and happiness of mankind ? It is proper, as hinted, for us to consider on the present occasion, how far our own families are infected with the evils mentioned ; for though it is not in our power to form the characters and manners of those whom Providence has committed to our care, however well disposed we may be to it, yet much may and ought to be done, with a view to that important purpose. A neglect of family religion and government, as it opens the doors of vice on the first principles of society, so, perhaps, more than any thing besides, threatens the interests of virtue and the welfare and happiness of mankind. If indeed on examining we find, that with fidelity and care we have endeavoured to perform our duty towards those whom the parent of all has put under our direction, it may afford us satisfaction at all events, though our pious endeavours have proved ever so ineffectual. And yet it is expedient, no doubt, for us, like pious Job, to sacrifice in behalf of our children, and affectionately to commend to the Father of Spirits what we are incapable of amending ourselves. Inestimable privilege of the pious parent ! that he may present himself, with his children, at the feet of that gracious Sovereign who hath all power, and is
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all compassion. But this leads us to an object, if possible, more interesting than that of family and children, viz. our own hearts and lives. How far have we escaped the contagion of vice with which we are surrounded ! With what bands of wickedness are we held, which we are this day called upon to loose. The year we have past since the last anniversary of this kind, makes no inconsiderable stage in the journey of life, here then let us pause, cast our eyes backwards, how short the space since our journey began ! Short as it is, it has brought us perhaps, near to our final home.—How have we travelled in the path of virtue or of vice ? Have we lived to any valuable purpose ?—To the good of those around us ?—To the glory of him who made us ? Let us look inward ; what do we find in that secret apartment, where, though our fellow-creatures can never pry, the great God is continually conversant ? Do we find an indwelling Christ, forming us to a filial trust in the Father of being, and exciting an holy emulation of resembling our Redeemer in heart and life ? Or is our heart the seat of worldly affections ? An altar devoted to mammon,—inflamed with pride,—and deformed with base passion or ungovernable appetites ?

STRONG as the bands of wickedness are, they are capable of being loosed ; but the longer neglected, the closer are the cords of vice drawn round the hearts of men. How dangerous to slight a disease which is difficult of cure at the best ; and which is constantly gaining ground by such neglect !—Proficients in religion will find, on in-

spection, that their virtues are in an infant state; that the light within them, is clouded with much remaining darkness; and the law of the spirit incumbered with that law of sin, from the government of which it is designed to free them. They will therefore, with a genuine abasement of soul, mourn their deficiencies, whilst they are assured of pardon and acceptance in Jesus their Saviour; on whose divine agency they cheerfully rely, for perfecting what is already begun, and gradually to raise them above the darkness and impurity of sense and sin, into the light, holiness, love and joy of his own perfection.

BUT we proceed as proposed, to some particular addressees. And first to the elder part of the community, whose years give them a natural pre-eminence, and joined to a good character, great authority and influence in society. Your example and instructions may do much towards forming the manners of the rising generation. Be ye then followers of Christ, that they may safely follow you: let your grey hairs give weight to your wise and affectionate advices: and whatever services you have rendered to mankind in earlier days, will be exceeded by the happy effects of such divine wisdom, shining around you in the evening of life; and the greatest reward will attend your latest services.

HEADS of families are rulers by the appointment of Heaven, over their domestic circle; and though we would not have them tyrants, we would earnestly entreat them to use their authority in the cause of virtue, and the happiness of those committed

committed to their charge. At least you are bound to restrain them as far as possible, from the haunts of vice, from places of temptation; and to train them up in the knowledge of the principles and duties of religion; especially by carefully practising those duties yourselves.—That must be a cruel parent indeed, who does not thus much, at least, for the present comfort and future salvation of his children. Those intrusted with offices, will gain honour to their characters, and peace to their own minds, by improving them in the service of religion. And greatness is the reward of service done in the cause of virtue and human happiness. If any man will be great among you, let him become your servant. Your services may indeed be unnoticed by the world, being performed in the vale of obscurity, but they shall finally shine out with unfading lustre, when graciously approved and rewarded by your Redeemer himself.—In the more than twenty years I have been with you, some attempts have been made for suppressing vice, by a strict execution of the laws; they were pleasing, and had they been pursued with energy, and perseverance proportioned to the object, might have produced happy effects. What has hitherto been too much neglected, may still be put in practice. And suffer me, my brethren, with a zeal and earnestness suited to my office, to intreat you to second, the otherwise feeble efforts of our minister, to discountenance vice, and promote the cause of virtue and religion. But let us remember, nothing will do this so effectually as our own good example. In vain will you execute the laws on vice; in

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vain shall we plead the cause of religion, if our general conduct does not witness the sincerity of our hearts, and our affection to the interests we are professedly supporting.—My young friends will listen with attention, whilst I once more urge them, with a kind of parental tenderness, to embrace the dictates of wisdom, and fly from the snares of vice.—Not contenting yourselves with a regular outward behaviour, endeavour that religion may possess your hearts. ‘Give me thy heart,’ is the demand of him who made, of him who died to save you ; to this you are urged by the voice of reason, by numberless effecting motives in the conduct of providence. This is the language of that blessed spirit which speaks in your own breasts ; a language easily understood, and which obeyed, will certainly acquaint you with that divine wisdom whose ways are pleasantness, and all whose paths are peace.—Think not, my dear young people, that the religion of Jesus can be any impediment to your present joys ; we have never painted it in the gloomy colours of superstition and bigotry. Jesus is all compassion ; he knows our frame, and has adapted his religion to the peace and comfort of the present, as well as the happiness of the future state.—‘She is a tree of life to them that find her ; and happy is every one who retaineth her.’ How safely will you pursue life’s journey with such a guide ? How cheerfully submit to its evils, when sweetened with her consolations ?—How will the presence of Jesus sustain you in the vale of death ! and how certainly will your short journey terminate in endless glory and happiness ?—Let us all
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be minded, that Christ has visited this lower world to loose the bands of wickedness, to releafe the captive children of men from bondage to sin, and to raise them to a likeness with himself; so far as religion produces this effect on our hearts and lives, it answers the design of its author, and affords a sure earnest of compleat salvation and happiness in the presence and enjoyment of God forever.

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